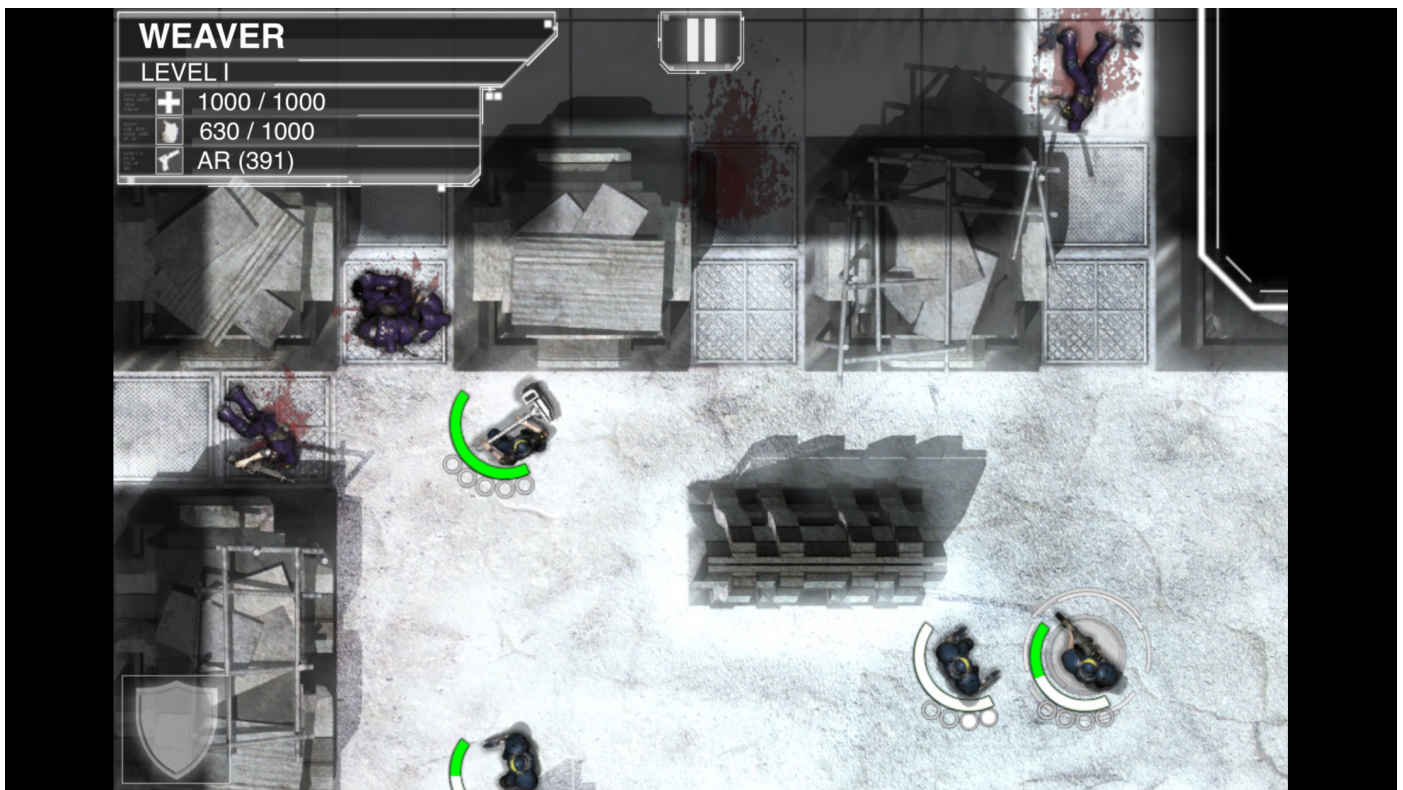


RPG Reload File 074 – 'Hunters: Episode One'

[March 24, 2016](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



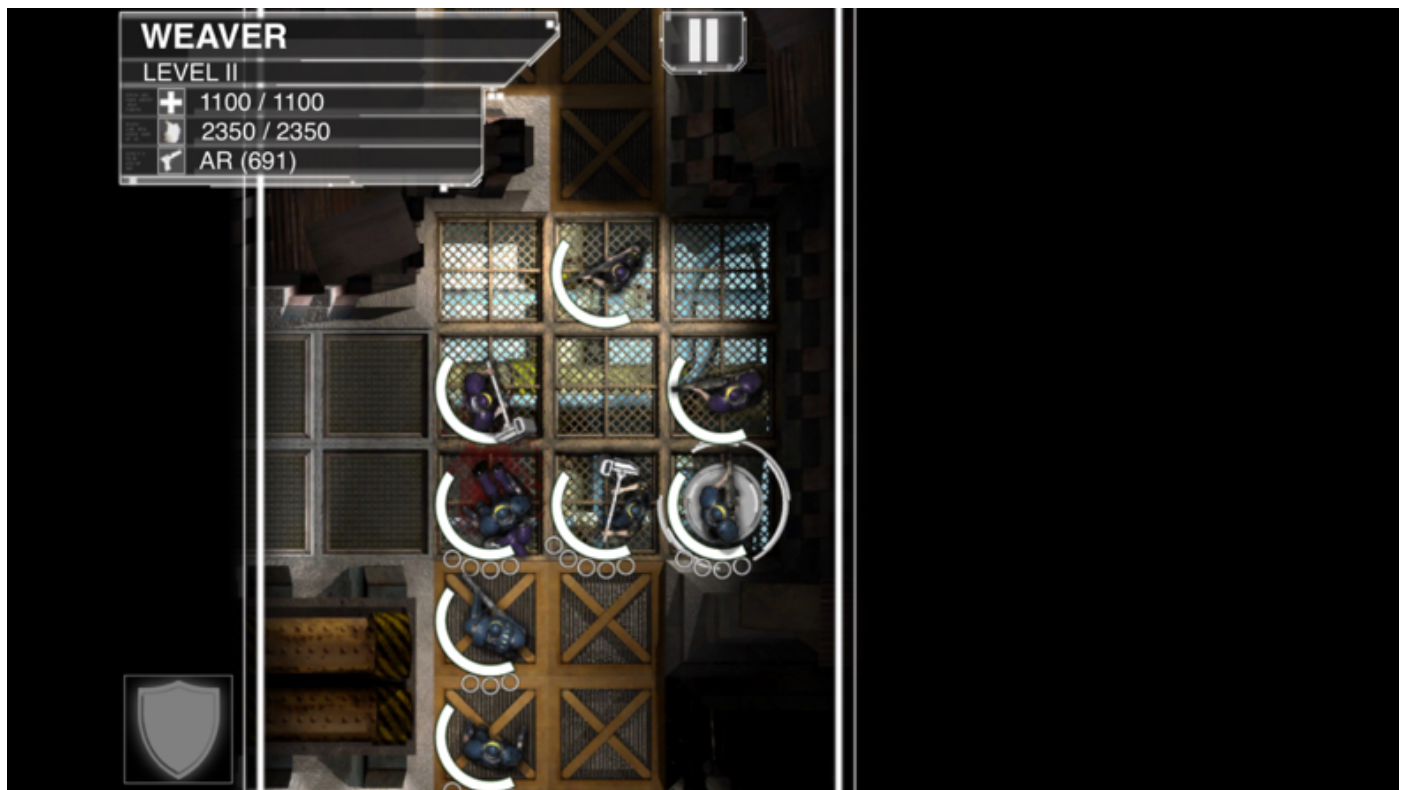
Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where we don't have much better to do than grind our daily quests. Each week, we take a look at an RPG from the App Store's past to see how it holds up in the light of our futuristic society of today. It's a chance to revisit old favorites, reflect on their place in the App Store's history, or just to take a deeper dive than our reviews typically allow for. As the person carrying the giant hammer, I try to choose a balanced schedule of games from week to week that nicely represent the genre. If you feel like I'm missing something important, however, please let me know. You can do that by commenting below, posting in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#) in the forums, or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#). It might take a while for your suggestion to get featured, since I plan the schedule pretty far in advance, but I will add it to the master list at least.



This week's game is another one of those games that sits on the line of being an RPG. *Hunters: Episode One* ([\\$4.99](#)), from Rodeo Games, is a strategy game with a lot of RPG mechanics cooked into it. It would serve as a foundation for Rodeo's more obviously RPG-like efforts in the strategy genre, such as *Warhammer Quest* ([\\$2.99](#)) and *Warhammer 40k: Deathwatch* ([\\$1.99](#)), but without any real story, campaign, or end point to the game, it's certainly a simpler affair than we're used to in this column. Nevertheless, since it did pave the way for those games, I think it's worth taking a look at the first *Hunters* game.

Based in Guildford, England, Rodeo Games was founded in 2010 by four people who had worked on games for Criterion, Codemasters, Sony, and others. When they decided to form their own studio, they felt the mobile market was the right place for a small developer to get started. They wanted to make the kinds of games they wanted to play on the platform, and that's where the idea for *Hunters* came from. Planning on the game started in March of 2010, and the game went into active development in August of that year. The game finally released in February of 2011 for iOS after what must have been a fairly intensive six months of work. An Android version followed

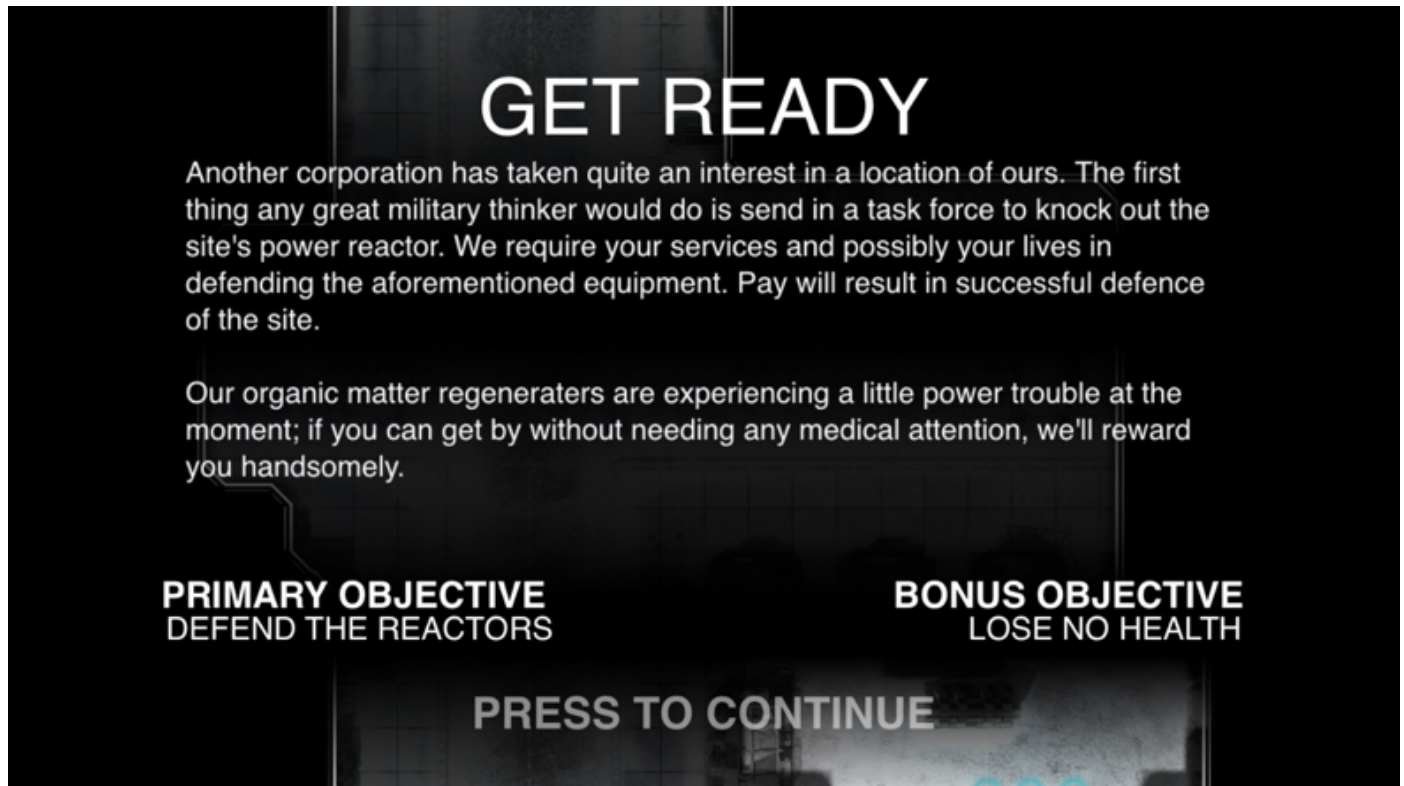
much later, in November of 2012.



Hunters: Episode One was designed with mobile in mind. That was at least part of the thinking behind the game's very unusual mission structure when compared to other strategy games. The team believed that since mobile gamers tended to prefer shorter gameplay sessions, it was better to set up the game in terms of one-off missions with no overarching story or narrative connection. Although the missions themselves run anywhere from 15 minutes to a half hour or so, only five of them are made available each day. You can replay them as much as you like, but you can't get any new missions until that 24 hour clock has elapsed.

Consideration for mobile players wasn't the only reason behind this, however. The developers also envisioned *Hunters* as a sort of living game, where players would be excited to check out the new content for each day and new missions could be delivered similar to a weekly TV show. I think it's kind of funny how in the years since *Hunters* released, many people's TV habits have switched to a binge style of consumption. In hindsight, that's probably more what gamers would have wanted from *Hunters*, as well. It's

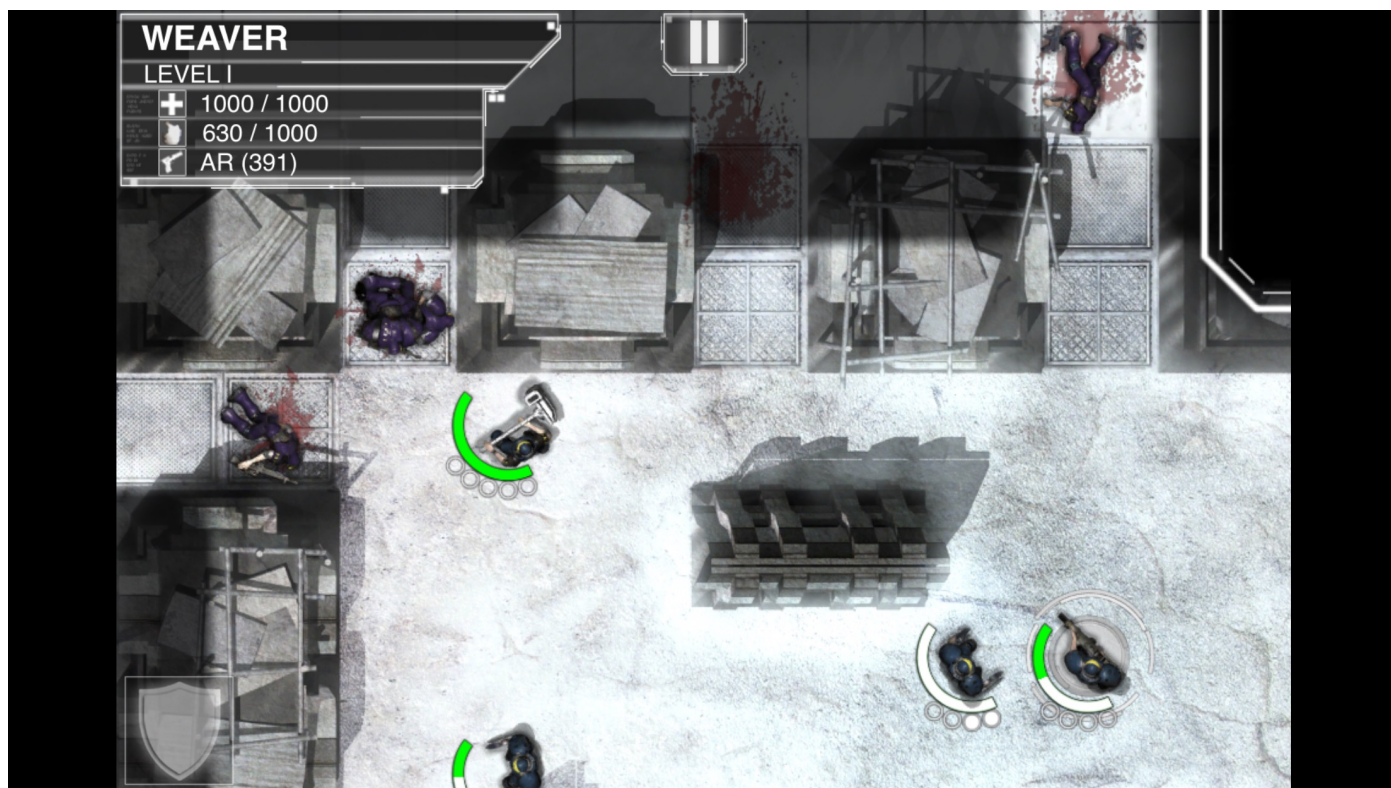
not hard to see how the developers were intrigued by the idea, though. One of major appeal points of successful free-to-play games is that they're constantly being updated with new content, so there's always something new to check out. For whatever it's worth, it seems like Rodeo planned to add some sort of story campaign to the game through a future update. I'm guessing that idea became *Hunters 2* ([\\$1.99](#)).



The game also initially launched as a free app, allowing you to play a certain amount of content before directing you to an IAP to unlock the rest of the game. It also used incentivized ads and allowed players to buy in-game cash via IAPs, as well. Not bad ideas for the mobile market in general, even back in 2011 when things were more fertile on the App Store, but it might have been a misread of the already-burgeoning strategy game fanbase on iOS, who felt very strongly about premium games and had demonstrated they were willing to pay for them. Aside from the full game unlock, none of the bells and whistles were needed, mind you. Since the game is basically endless and there's no way to actually lose anything, you're always going to be making some kind of progress as you play. As there's no final boss to worry about, it's not as though you're grinding towards a goal. You just need to be strong

enough to handle whatever missions come your way on a given day.

Though the IAP, lack of campaign, and unorthodox mission structure made some players wary, *Hunters* soon won over a pretty large contingent of fans thanks to its high-quality strategic gameplay. It's since been surpassed a few times over, not the least of which by its own successors, but for the time, it was easy to play, offered a great deal of flexibility in terms of tactical options, and hit a nice sweet spot with its difficulty. Even without a particular flag on a mountain to work towards, players enjoyed developing their squad of mercenaries over time, leveling them up and equipping them with newer and better gear. *Hunters* even managed to earn some praise from channels outside of the usual mobile crowd. Most notably, it caught the attention of Julian Gollop, the creator of *XCOM*, *Rebelstar*, and many other genre greats. When your work is being praised by one of the most well-regarded creators in the genre's history, you know you've done something right.



It's that persistent squad that makes *Hunters* of interest to RPG fans. As you play through missions, your squad members will level up, allowing you to allocate points to new abilities. Though your characters will start off with

little separating them save their equipment, after they've gained a few levels they'll have very different skills and abilities. The equipment is the other side of the equation. You'll find some new gear as loot, but you'll mostly come by new weapons and armor through the shop. Completing missions earns you cash, and you can roll that cash into some nice upgrades for your team. The biggest decision is which weapons you want each character to bring with them. If you run with a melee-heavy team equipped with hammers, you'll have to use a very different plan from someone who is using a bunch of long-range rifles and rocket launchers.

Planning is absolutely vital, too. As your squad becomes more powerful, the missions scale up with them. The game is never easy, not even in the very first mission you play. Fortunately, it's not quite cruel, either. The AI doesn't suffer foolish mistakes, though, so the sooner you learn to avoid making them, the better off you'll be. The game uses fog of war to obscure things that are outside of the line of sight of your characters, so if you want to get things right on the first try, you'll have to carefully edge around every corner. Each of your units has a set number of action points they can use on a turn, and if you extend yourself too far, you won't be able to move back out of harm's way. How that works in *Hunters* is fairly simple. There's no fancy cover system or anything like that. To avoid getting hurt, you need to either be out of range of the enemy's attack, or out of their line of sight. Well, I guess there's the third option of murdering them before they can even get a shot in, but that leaves you vulnerable to whatever might be behind them. There's always something behind them.



Since you have so few tactical options, every move is crucial. While it might be a lot of fun to run in and try to have some big hero moments, you'll almost certainly lose a unit quickly in such cases. And once you lose a unit, things really start to go downhill fast. With your limited number of action points per turn, you'll want to move to a point where you can put eyes on a target, maybe take a shot at said target, get back to safety, and if you've still got anything left, engage over-watch so that you aren't totally defenseless on the enemy's turn. Generally, you'll have between three and five action points per turn, so that doesn't give you much wiggle room for movement. Any mission that requires you to leave your starting area should be handled very slowly.

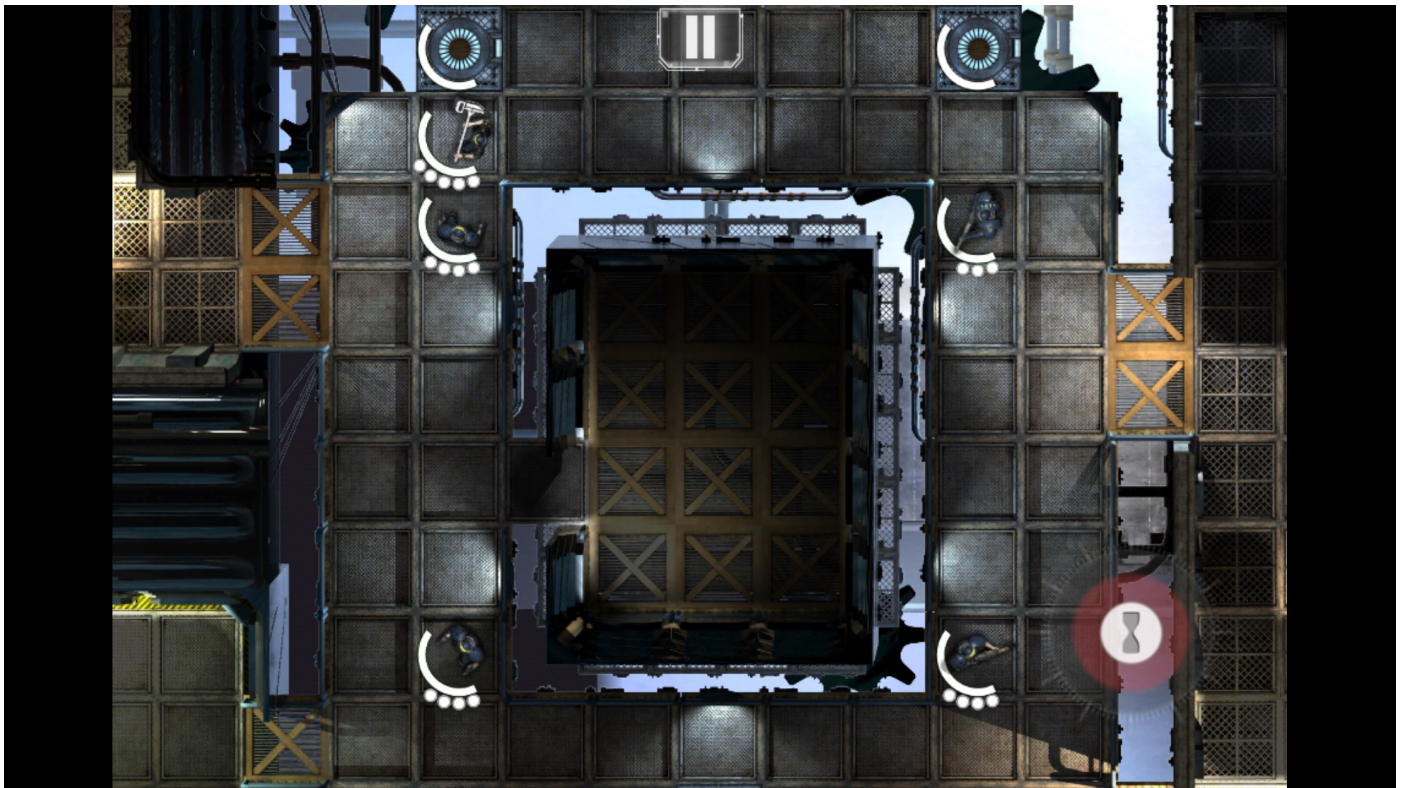
Not that it matters all that much in the long run, or even the short run. There are no serious consequences for death in this game, so if you blow it and lose everyone, you haven't really lost anything. This is one of the ways the game drops the ball in terms of making you care about your units. The debate rages on about the value of permadeath in many strategy game circles, particularly the *Fire Emblem* fan community of late. I feel like there are a lot of ways to make players value their units, but one thing is clear to

me: if players don't value their units, it has a bad effect on a strategy RPG. The whole point of incorporating RPG elements is make players get invested in their units so that they won't risk them as fodder. As a result, strategy RPGs with major consequences for character death often feel a lot like puzzles the player needs to solve. I'm not saying you can't have a fun game without that, of course. But the strategy starts to go out the window as soon as a player figures out they can just chuck units in the meat grinder to break the mission.



It's hard to get attached to your characters in *Hunters*. There's no permadeath, no story, no personalities to get involved with. This was a lesson learned for Rodeo, and they would continue improving on this aspect with each subsequent release. Here, the only incentive you have to keep characters alive is that missions become significantly harder to overcome with a shorthanded squad. But since you can easily retry a mission and probably even come out ahead on the whole deal cash-wise, even that is a minor rub at best. With the mission structure being what it is, there's also no motivation to bang your head against a mission if it's giving you serious problems. It's not like you need to beat it anyway, right?

These issues are why, even though the core mechanics are strong and the basic ideas are good, *Hunters: Episode One* isn't quite the game it ought to be. Especially given Rodeo Games stuck to this genre and kept on improving. *Deathwatch* is *Hunters* in a vastly improved form, and even if certain aspects of that game rub you the wrong way, *Hunters 2* is also a considerably more well-rounded experience than the original game in the series. I'd go so far as to say that *Hunters 2* effectively negates the need of owning or playing *Hunters: Episode One*. As they say, you can't run without first learning how to walk, and the basic foundation laid out in *Hunters* made everything Rodeo did after it possible. But this is RPG country, and we all know you don't ever take those sprint shoes off once you've found them.



It doesn't help that the game was basically left untouched after the release of *Hunters 2*. Rodeo had talked a lot about expanding *Hunters* through major updates, but outside of one fairly significant update in June of 2011, the game was only patched for bug fixes. It still generally works fine on modern hardware and iOS versions, but the incentivized ads sometimes don't load, and the OpenFeint features obviously don't function at all anymore. Never mind support for any of the additions to iOS that have come after the game's

final update in April 2012. Certain features that were talked about in plans for future updates like story packs and multiplayer never came to pass, and I think it's safe to say that *Hunters: Episode One* is very unlikely to see any additional updates unless it completely breaks. Even then, it's hard to say if it would justify the costs of fixing it. For such an old app, it's at least proven to be remarkably stable, so hopefully it won't be put to the test for a while yet.

Hunters Episode One : Trailer

Hunters: Episode One is an important game in terms of carving a path for what followed, but taken as a game rather than a piece of history, I'm not sure it has a lot to offer anymore. The core is solid, but everything good about the game was carried forward into better works. That's just my take on the game, though. What do you all think? You can share your thoughts by posting in the comments below, dropping by the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#). As for me, I'll be back next week with a more typical kind of RPG. Thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload: *Crusade Of Destiny* ([\\$2.99](#))